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ABSTRACT

In response to the need for research methods training in the public relations undergraduate curriculum, this paper identifies the range of possible formats for a public relations research methods course (analyzing strengths and weaknesses for each) and recommends a hybrid format. The paper then identifies and compares different goals for research methods classes in public relations versus communication, journalism, and mass communication. On the basis of the available models, and balancing of goals, the paper then proposes specific course content for a full semester course. One figure and one table of data are included. (Author/SR)

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of the
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Abstract

This paper identifies the range of possible formats for a public relations research methods course, analyzing strengths and weaknesses for each and recommends a hybrid format. It then identifies and compares different goals for research methods classes in public relations versus communication, journalism, and mass communication. On the basis of the available models, and balancing of goals, specific course content is proposed for a full semester course.

## Introduction

One school of philosophical thought holds that what we can know is determined by the tools that we have for knowing, and that these tools can and do impose their assumptions on our body of knowledge. Philosophers from this school take the position that there is no such thing as objective research. Instead, they hold that all research is necessarily subjective and largely reflects the biases of researcher and method. A second school of philosophical thought holds that there is an objective world that can best be understood through a dispassionate and objective assessment employing "objective" research methods.

This paper uses as its point of departure the implied recognition by that both schools that one's methods of knowing are the "point of contact with the world (Poole & McPhee, 1985, p. 101). So the research methods public relations does, or does not, teach its students will not only influence how they see existing knowledge, but the arenas within which they will seek new knowledge and what they will identify it as when they confront it.

As public relations has accepted that research methods provide students and practitioners a point of contact with which to assess their world and plan how to deal with it, research methods education has been thought to be more and more important. The 1975 Report of the Commission on Public Relations Education called for both a statistics class and a survey research class in the undergraduate curriculum. The 1987 Commission on Undergraduate Public Relations Education found that "Public relations students need to know more than how to construct messages. They need to know the process of public relations research

for planning and evaluating programs of actions, including programs of communication" (p. 24.). Broom and Dozier (1990) support this contention with four specific reasons for research being essential to public relations, "a) high stakes riding on the outcome, b) complicated information structure . . ., c) no identifiable authority to provide correct answer . . . and d) need to justify the decision . . . . .." (p. 51).

Although the need to provide methods courses has been recognized, there is no consensus as to what they should entail. Such training might, for example, be particular to the needs of public relations or general, ignoring distinctions between research methods for public relations and other social sciences. It is possible to visualize a range of such courses on a continuum (see Figure 1).

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Insert Figure 1 About Here

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## Three Models of Public Relations Research Methods Instruction

### Generic

At one pole of Figure 1 (1) is a pedagogic position which says that "research methods are research methods." This polar position implies that research methods for public relations students might as easily be taught by a sociologist or psychologist as a public relations or communication scholar. This position holds that research methods are a set of tools divorced from any particular body of knowledge or theory and it contradicts Poole and McPhee's (1985) position that:

> theory determines method: It indicates what data are appropriate and places limits on how these data may best be obtained. On this view, an emphasis on method apart from theory is misguided and may be downright misleading. (p. 100-101).

Sending public relations students to a math department to take a course in statistics would be an extreme illustration of this position, which we will label the generic course position.

This model has several benefits, however. A newly emergent field can make use of, and integrate into itself, the research experience of older fields. Public relations' students become familiar with over arching skills, such as mathematical manipulations. Departments that lack teaching resources, or student demand, can still provide training in research methods, thereby advantaging their students in the job market. On the other hand, this pole has the drawbacks of being isolated from our body of knowledge and not providing the specific public relations training which students and future employers expect of a public relations research course. Students trained in this model are unlikely to have any experience at actually conducting or analyzing public relations research, particularly evaluative research, when they go job hunting or pursue graduate work.

Dedicated Course

At the other end of the continuum (10) is the pole of the dedicated public relations research methods class. A course taught from this model would concern itself with those research methods which public relations uses, or is likely to use, and may be concerned with providing marketable hands on skills in research. The result would include

concentration on evaluative research, interviewing and survey work, and certain qualitative approaches, for example, focus groups and textual analysis, while tending not to emphasize issues of theory development, experimental design, random assignment, induction and deduction, and the like. Several authors, including Botan (1989), Toth (1986), Pavlik (1987), and others, have concluded that there has been little by way of theory driven research in public relations, so a concentration on those methods currently being used in public relations might lead away from an understanding of the link between theory and methods rather than a fuller grasp of it.

This model also has many benefits. It is dedicated to meeting the needs of the market by training consumers of current public relations research and using available time and resources to actually practice the conduct of public relations research. Students who practice conducting research, interpreting findings, and writing up results, may find themselves at an advantage in the job market. This model, however, can have the drawback of casting public relations research methods as a set of applications isolated from theory development. Since "a profession must be built upon a specialized body of knowledge based in theory developed through research" (Cutlip, Center & Broom, 1985, p. 467) such a course, while dedicated to public relations, might have the ironic effect of inhibiting our development as a profession.

Hybrid Course

A third model, intermediary to the first two, occupies most of the continuum (3-8) and might be labeled the hybrid course. A course taught from this model conceives of public relations research as a specialized

kind of communication (or mass communication) research and seeks to address particular interests of public relations research while grounding it in broader theory and methodology.

This model has the benefit of using existing resources to teach the course while still addressing the particular needs of future public relations practitioners. But this model runs the risk of simply presenting the two research traditions without explaining how they are related. In this regard the hybrid model may be the most difficult of the models to teach from.

An even more common approach is a kind of de facto hybrid course (4-6) in which public relations students are simply enrolled into existing communication, mass communication, or journalism courses. They are then basically left to shift for themselves, based on the assumption that public relations is a specialized kind of communication so the study of research methods for communication subsumes public relations. This model sometimes does not provide much of the specific training which students and employers expect, particularly with respect to evaluation, interviewing, and the more qualitative approaches, but it is still much more oriented to public relations than the generic model.

Exactly where to divide the continuum in Figure 1 is not important. These are conceptual poles, not absolute ones. The authors suggest that a course format within the hybrid range, but close to the dedicated pole (7-8), may meet the needs of the majority of public relations research methods courses by providing a course that specifically addresses the needs of public relations students while also linking training in public relations research methods to communication

and mass communication research.

Goal of the Course

Basic and applied research address different kinds of issues. Basic research, according to Kerlinger (1979) is:

> research done to test theory, to study relations among phenomena in order to understand the phenomena, with little or no thought to applications of the results of the research to practical problems. (p. 283)

Applied research, also according to Kelinger, is:

> research directed toward the solution of specified practical problems in delineated areas and from which amelioration or improvement in some process or activity, or achievement of practical goals, is expected. So-called pragmatic and directed research are applied research. Such research is directed toward particular goals that promise solutions to usually pressing problems. (p. 283)

The principle difference between public relations research and more general social science research is the formers greater emphasis on application. The social sciences are certainly concerned with application, but not nearly as wholeheartedly as public relations.

In spite of our argument above that public relations research methods training should include some introduction to the link between theory and methods, we are aware that such training is aimed primarily at solving applied problems, principally intelligence gathering about publics and evaluation of public relations practices. The Commission on Undergraduate Public Relations Education (1987), for example said of

public relations, "It requires a high degree of skill [emphasis added] in environmental assessment, in negotiation, in joint program planning and in the appraisal of performance" (p. 15). The Commission (1987) went on to say:

> The difference, however, between public relations research and social science research is that the former must always incorporate the methodologies of evaluative research. In other words, public relations research is not only fact-finding research, it is also evaluative research. Hence, standards (norms) of evaluation must be identified by the public relations researcher and utilized so that the findings are relevant for public relations decision-making [emphasis added]. (p. 25).

Contrast, for example, the Commission' emphasis on application with Frey and Botan's (1988) finding that 86% of the communication, mass communication, and journalism departments that teach research methods indicated that student understanding and their development as knowledgeable consumers of research is an important goal. Only 34.2% of such departments identified training students to produce research as a goal, although both goals were identified by many departments.

Public relations research methods education differs from broader communication, journalism and mass communication methods training in its emphasis on applied skills. Therefore, the public relations research methods course may differ from its more broadly based cousins in communication and mass communication in being more oriented toward production of research. This is not to say that the public relations research methods course should be unconcerned with training

knowledgeable consumers of research, just that the relative importance given to production may be somewhat greater. Public relations practitioners often have as their first need the ability to plan and evaluate public relations efforts and such evaluation often plays a larger role for practitioners than does applied research for persons in other communication careers.

## Course Content

The Commission on Undergraduate Public Relations Education (1987) surveyed practitioners and educators as to what courses they thought should be included in undergraduate public relations curriculum. Out of 70 areas the respondents ranked 4 research methodology areas (Measuring Program Effectiveness, Decision-making Based on Results, Tools/Methods of Evaluation/Measurement, and Public Relations Research/Designs/ Processes/Techniques) among the ten highest ranked areas (Commission, 1987, p. 9-11).

In spite of the emphasis which public relations practitioners and educators, and communication departments, are placing on research methods training, ability to deliver such training seems limited. Frey and Botan (1988) reported that of communication, journalism and mass communication departments:

> The course was taught every semester by 37.0% of [184] responding departments, once a year by 51.9%, and less than once a year by 11.1%, and had been taught for an average of 8.0 years, indicating that this is an emerging course in the communication curriculum. The average number of sections was 1.3, with a range of 1-7 sections, but 82.7% of departments offered only one section. . .

> From one to ten faculty taught the course with an average of 1.7. Only one faculty member teaching the course accounted for 65.8% of the responses while those with only two faculty teaching the course accounted for another 17.7%, for a total of 83.5% of departments using two faculty members or less. (p. 251)

These study findings suggest both that there will be an increasing demand for research methods training for public relations students and that the resources may not be available, at least in the short term, to meet that demand in the form of dedicated courses. For this reason we expect the primary form for these classes to be the hybrid -- often taught for public relations and non-public relations students jointly. Such a hybrid format will require a course content which, while emphasizing public relations research methods, will have to be responsive to other communication, journalism, and mass communication students in the same classes. A discussion of specific content for such a course follows.

Goals and Objectives

> To help students to become knowledgeable consumers, and limited producers, of public relations research and to understand how it is similar to, and different from, other social science research. In preparing students to become effective practitioners of public relations, this course teaches both how effective assessment and evaluation is conducted and how theory driven research is employed to help develop the theory base of the field.

Assignments

TESTS: Two or three tests. Three seems quite effective for research

methods classes as the material tends to lend itself to a tripartite division and students may feel more confident of the material when it is subdivided into more "bite size" chunks.

ABSTRACT(s): One or more abstracts should be written by students, preferably late in the semester, in which they show their ability to understand and summarize academic research articles such as those published in Public Relations Review, or Public Relations Research Annual. This assignment assesses development of the student as an effective consumer of public relations research.

SEMESTER PROJECT: Students should complete a major term paper entailing the collection and analysis of data for a simple, one dimensional, analysis of the effectiveness of a public relations campaign. It is important that students get the experience of analyzing some results and reporting their own interpretation of these. Teachers may wish to provide sample data or allow students to conduct their own study, depending on such factors as class size, weight of this assignment, etc.

Ideally, each student should conduct their own pilot study including data collection using whatever methodology the teacher assigns. Given the common use of qualitative methods (including focus groups, observation, and textual analysis) in public relations work, it is advisable not to restrict this assignment to quantitative methods alone. This assignment, in its literature review, hones the student's skills as a knowledgeable consumer of research but adds the dimension of actual application of research methods, it therefore requires careful guidance from the

instructor. We strongly recommend that the assignment be subdivided into smaller parts/papers and spread out over a large part of the semester.

STYLE: Class work should be typed according to a major style manual, such as the manual of the American Psychological Association, 3rd edition. Use of other people's ideas or words must be properly referenced (and a plagiarism lecture incorporated into the course).

SPECIFIC CONTENT RECOMMENDATIONS

Following is the rough outline of a full semester (16 week) course in the hybrid model. More detailed explanation of what is typically covered in research methods courses in communication, mass communication, and journalism, and in what depth, is provided in Table 2, reproduced from Frey and Botan (1988). Books such as Using Research in Public Relations by Broom and Dozier (1990) or Investigating Communication by Frey, Botan, Friedman, and Kreps (1990) could be used. The former book would be particularly applicable for a more dedicated course and the latter for one more inclusive of communication, journalism, and mass communication students. The hybrid course recommended here could profitably employ either.

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Insert Table 1 About

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STATISTICS: Recognizing that many public relations programs do not at present have room for two methods courses, a large statistics component is included here to attempt to meet the Commission's

(1975) admonition to include classes in both survey research and statistics. This emphasis is also suggested by the central role of measurable objectives, the highly quantitative orientation of most managers, and the statistical orientation of two closely allied fields, advertising and marketing.

WEEKS AND SUBJECT:

1) Introduction.

2) Issues Faced in Public Relations Research. The kinds of questions which public relations requires answers to. The applied orientation of public relations and the importance of evaluation and planning should be highlighted.

3) Role of Theory. Public relations theory, how it guides research and practice, how research can add to theory.

4) Qualitative Research. Focus groups, content and textual analysis, etc.

5) Experimental Design. Independent and dependent variables. Experimental, quasi-experimental, and pre-experimental designs. Internal validity. Causation. Longitudinal and time series analysis.

6) Test #1, Research Strategies.

7) Operationalization and Measurement. Operational definitions, levels of measurement. Reliability.

8) Surveys and Design. Kinds of surveys. Item and questionnaire construction. Psychographics and sociographics.

9) Sampling. Kinds of probability (random) and non-random sampling. Generalizability and external validity.

10) Hypothesis Testing. Research questions vs. hypotheses. One and two tailed hypotheses. Degrees of freedom and critical values.

11) Test #2, Planning and Conducting Research.

12) Theory and Purposes of Statistics. Normal curve and probabilities, drawing conclusions. Descriptive statistics.

13) Measures of Association. Tests for associations between variables, including, Pearson Correlation, regression and multiple regression.

14) Tests of Difference. Tests for differences between groups, including Chi-Square, t-test, and ANOVA.

15) Ethics in Public Relations Research. How research is conducted and used ethically, including treatment of subjects and proprietary results. Examples of unethical practices and identification of warning signs to help detect unethical research or the unethical use of research results.

16) Test #3, Statistics.

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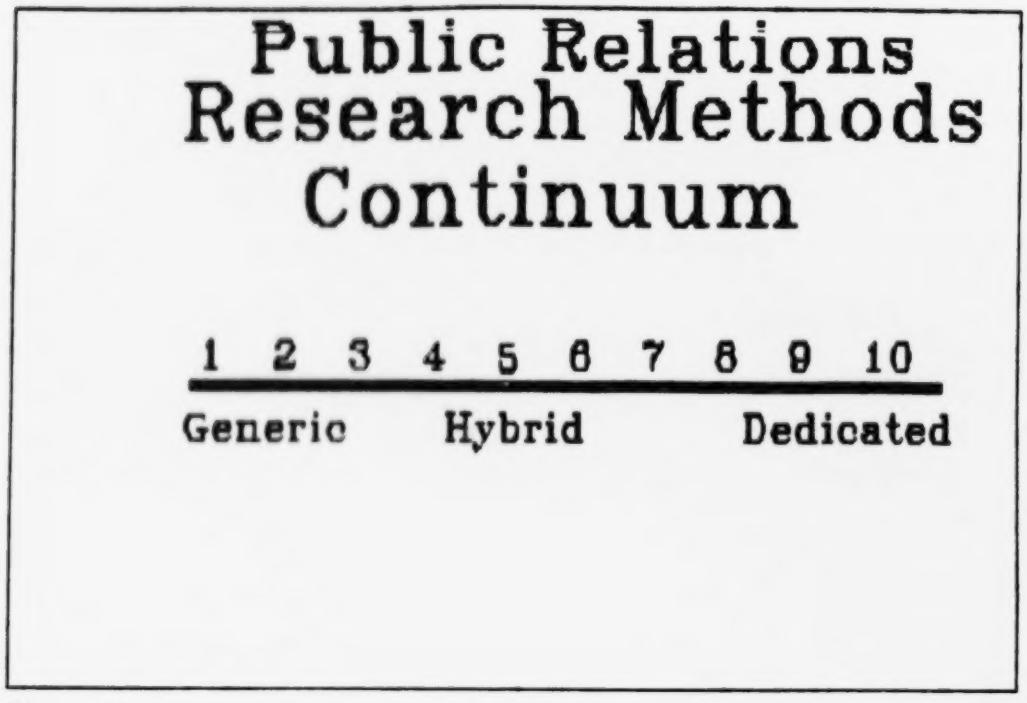
Public Relations
Research Methods
Continuum
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Generic
Hybrid
Dedicated

Figure 1

Table 1
Course Content for Research Methods Classes in
Communication, urnalism and Mass Communication
(Reproduc from Frey & Botan, 1988)

These data were analyzed using two procedures. First, the percentage of respondents who covered each topic was determined and these percentages were rank ordered. Second, because the total number of class periods reported was widely disparate, all data about class periods were converted to percentage of course time spent on each topic, averaged across respondents, and then rank ordered. These two rankings, however, demonstrated some wide differences. For example, "The Nature of Theory," while ranked fourth in terms of percentage of respondents who covered it was ranked twentieth in terms of percentage of course time devoted to it. To compensate for these differences in rank, the two rank-ordered scores for course content were averaged to obtain a composite rank. This procedure hopefully provides an overall picture of what content is covered and the relative importance of each topic based on time spent. The results (including raw number of class sessions and standard deviation) are reported in Table 1.

Not surprisingly, according to this composite ranking, the top-ranked topic in the introductory course was research design. The second-ranked topic was theory of statistics, followed by research questions/hypotheses, sampling and variables (tied for fourth), instrumentation, qualitative research, scaling and parametric statistics (tied for eighth), and characteristics of science and the nature of theory (tied for tenth).

TABLE 1

COURSE CONTENT

| Composite Rank | Course Content | Pct. Who Cover It | Rank | Pct. of Course | Rank | ($\bar{X}$ No. Periods)[1] | (SD of Periods) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Research Design | 93.3 | 1 | 9.66 | 1 | (4.07) | (3.07) |
| 2 | Theory of Statistics | 85.3 | 6 | 6.86 | 2 | (2.94) | (2.43) |
| 3 | Research Questions/Hypo. | 93.3 | 1 | 4.06 | 8 | (1.58) | (0.94) |
| 4 | Sampling | 89.3 | 3 | 4.26 | 7 | (1.86) | (1.29) |
| 4 | Variables | 86.7 | 5 | 4.62 | 5 | (1.98) | (1.24) |
| 6 | Instrumentation | 85.1 | 9 | 6.64 | 3 | (2.75) | (1.91) |
| 7 | Qualitative Research | 81.3 | 12 | 4.51 | 6 | (1.75) | (1.45) |
| 8 | Parametric Statistics | 78.7 | 16 | 5.89 | 4 | (2.63) | (2.58) |
| 8 | Scaling | 85.3 | 6 | 3.41 | 14 | (1.51) | (1.44) |
| 10 | Characteristics of Science | 85.3 | 6 | 2.73 | 18 | (1.10) | (0.78) |
| 10 | Nature of Theory | 87.3 | 4 | 2.56 | 20 | (1.03) | (0.89) |
| 12 | Discussing Findings | 84.0 | 10 | 3.15 | 15 | (1.36) | (0.93) |
| 12 | Literature Review | 78.7 | 16 | 4.00 | 9 | (1.72) | (1.67) |
| 14 | Role of Research | 80.0 | 15 | 2.44 | 12 | (0.93) | (0.78) |
| 15 | Nonparametric Statistics | 78.7 | 16 | 3.44 | 12 | (1.54) | (1.35) |
| 16 | Levels of Measurement | 84.0 | 10 | 2.70 | 19 | (1.15) | (0.81) |
| 16 | Presenting Research | 70.7 | 23 | 2.86 | 16 | (1.17) | (1.08) |
| 18 | Philosophy of Science | 78.7 | 16 | 2.80 | 17 | (1.09) | (0.94) |
| 19 | Descriptive Research | 70.7 | 23 | 3.45 | 11 | (1.52) | (1.53) |
| 19 | Internal Validity | 81.3 | 12 | 2.02 | 22 | (0.84) | (0.62) |
| 19 | Reliability | 81.3 | 12 | 2.02 | 22 | (0.85) | (0.73) |
| 22 | Communication Studies | 66.7 | 26 | 3.77 | 10 | (1.53) | (2.07) |
| 23 | External Validity | 78.7 | 16 | 1.77 | 24 | (0.72) | (0.52) |
| 24 | Pitfalls of Research | 74.3 | 21 | 2.39 | 21 | (1.04) | (0.95) |
| 25 | Ethics of Research | 73.3 | 22 | 2.12 | 25 | (0.85) | (0.79) |
| 26 | Methods of Knowing | 68.0 | 25 | 1.63 | 26 | (0.66) | (0.55) |
| 27 | Historical Research | 40.0 | 28 | 1.51 | 27 | (0.63) | (1.07) |
| 28 | History of Discipline | 50.7 | 27 | 1.13 | 28 | (0.43) | (0.50) |
| 29 | Rhetorical-Critical Research | 32.0 | 29 | 1.01 | 29 | (0.42) | (0.75) |
| 30 | Legal Research | 9.3 | 30 | 0.32 | 30 | (0.17) | (0.75) |

[1]Mean number of 50-minute periods.